

Introduction to the Gospels

The four Gospels are the books of the New Testament with which we are most familiar since they are prominently featured at Mass. But what exactly is a Gospel?

As a literary form it comes from the opening words of the first written gospel, the Gospel of Mark: “The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” (Mark 1:1) The old English word *gospel* translates the Greek word *euangelion*, both of which mean “good news.” In fact, in a modern translation (NRSV) Mark’s Gospel begins, “The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Before the word Gospel was used by St. Mark to describe his written account of Jesus, *the Gospel* referred to the “good news” of Jesus Christ proclaimed *orally* by the Apostles, the earliest preaching of the Church (see Luke 9:6; Romans 1:3,15). This preaching, by those who knew Jesus, told about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They taught about him through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had given them. The Spirit enabled the Apostles and their followers to know Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the source of our salvation.

But as the Church expanded and as the Apostles got older, it became desirable to capture this authentic oral teaching by those who had personally known Jesus in writing. That was what St. Mark was the first to do, around the year 70 A.D., based on the tradition that was known to him and his community of believers. St. Mark was associated with St. Peter, who was the authority behind his gospel account.

Shortly afterward, three other written gospels came from three other communities of believers. The Gospel of Matthew was based on the authority of the Apostle Matthew. The Gospel of Luke was written by a follower of St. Paul and associated with his authority. Finally, the Gospel of John was written based on the authority of the Apostle John, the Beloved Disciple. All four gospels were probably written by 100 A.D.

In reading the Gospels we must understand what they are not. They are not modern biographies of Jesus, precisely indicating what we consider the important details of life with precise dates and locations. The Gospels help us understand the significance of Jesus. They “are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:31)

At the same time, what the Gospels teach is true. The Catechism summarizes its teaching about the reliability of the Gospels by describing the three stages of their formation. (CCC #126)

1. The life and teaching of Jesus. The Church holds firmly that the four Gospels, "whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up."

The first stage, which covered approximately the first third of the 1st Century, consists of what Jesus said and what he did during his earthly ministry.

2. The oral tradition. "For, after the ascension of the Lord, the apostles handed on to their hearers what he had said and done, but with that fuller understanding which they, instructed by the glorious events of Christ and enlightened by the Spirit of truth, now enjoyed."

This second stage was the early preaching of the Apostles. This takes place during the middle third of the 1st Century. Having witnessed the Resurrection, the Apostles had a better understanding of what Jesus said and did in stage 1. At this point some sayings and stories about Jesus were probably written down.

3. The written Gospels. "The sacred authors, in writing the four Gospels, selected certain of the many elements which had been handed on, either orally or already in written form; others they synthesized or explained with an eye to the situation of the churches, the while sustaining the form of preaching, but always in such a fashion that they have told us the honest truth about Jesus."

The third stage occurred during the last third of the 1st Century (about 70 AD - 100AD). The Gospel writers had much to work with. As St. John tells us, "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25)

What the Church is telling us is that each Gospel writer was inspired to put the stories and sayings together in the way that explained the significance of Jesus most clearly to their community of believers. Timing of events and the exact wording of sayings may differ according to how the Holy Spirit helped the writers to recall them. But in each case we have a picture of Jesus that is the honest truth.

None of us see or understand in the same way the real events that we experience in our lifetime. We are fortunate to have four "portraits" of the real Jesus, to help those of us, who never met the earthly Jesus, know who He is.

S. Csontos, 10 February 2013